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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the responses of students in two Philadelphia high schools to the second year of implementation of the Talent Development comprehensive school reform model. Both schools served low-income, predominantly African American and Hispanic American students. The Talent Development model was intended to improve schools facing problems with attendance, discipline, achievement, and dropping out. Its cornerstone was the Ninth Grade Success Academy, which promoted high expectations and extensive academic and social support as central vehicles for encouraging success for all. Interviews with 9th and 10th grade students were compared to interviews with students from a school in the first year of program implementation. Overall, students in both groups had similar attitudes. They were satisfied with the quality of their education and appreciated the support. Students articulated the value of teams as a meaningful organizational unit that connected them to the school via activities and offered more diverse learning activities. Students thought their teachers were doing a good job, that they themselves were making progress toward graduation, that few improvements were needed, and that their academy choice for the next year would help them with future careers. (SM)

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes the responses of students in two Philadelphia high schools to a second year of implementation of the Talent Development comprehensive school reform model developed by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University. The experience of students at a third high school in its first year of implementation is reported as well.

Based on interviews with 9th and 10th grade students, the story is similar to what we heard in the first year of the program. Teachers continued to find time to offer repeated explanations of assignments and content and to assist students requiring extra help; and the schools overall remained "organized," calm, and orderly. If anything were really different in students' comments, it was that they were beginning to lose their amazement at the positive changes in the school environment. Already, some students were beginning to switch their feelings of surprise to ones of expectation. "This is how a school is supposed to be," they observed. Thus, students' descriptions of their schools detailed a story of urban education on the ascent. Overall, it was remarkable that the program could sustain much of the initial year's progress in light of changes in District leadership and organizational structure.

Students' comments during this second year of interviews reinforced the notion that the block schedule allowed them to focus better, with fewer subjects to keep track of and more time to spend on the ones they had. The fact that they were separated from their older peers was also valued because it freed them from the potential peer pressure to misbehave. Further, the required Freshman Seminar course helped acclimatize students to high school and informed them about what life in high school and beyond would be like.

The students also noted changes that went beyond just the schools' maintenance of previously identified program strengths. Student comments elucidated a maturing character to the program that highlighted continued programmatic growth. First, students articulated the value of teams as a meaningful organizational unit in the school. Teams helped serve as a significant motivational tool (the teams helped connect students to school via activities and gave them tangible reasons for attending) and offered more diverse learning experiences (field trips, special after school tutorials, team teaching).

Second, students' descriptions of the content of the Freshman Seminar became more consistent from classroom to classroom. Third, students said that the work they were encountering was challenging, at least when compared to their middle school experiences. Students defined challenging work as either different from what they had learned previously or that they were being given more of it.

Overall, the students were satisfied with the quality of their education. They thought their teachers were doing a good job, that they themselves were making progress toward graduation, that few improvements were needed, and that their academy choice for the next year would help them with future careers.

Sustaining Reform: Students' Appraisals of The Second Year in Talent Development High Schools In Philadelphia, 2000-2001

Two years ago, students in two Philadelphia Talent Development high schools expressed grateful surprise to find clean – and appropriately used – stairwells, few fights, and classrooms with infrequent disruptions. They also were appreciative of teachers' willingness to give them help on assignments and to repeat – and vary – explanations of hard-to-understand material. These experiences ran counter to what they had seen and/or heard about in previous years in these buildings. Recounting the changes that had precipitated such a turnaround, students listed metal detectors, a computerized attendance system, more non-teaching aides (NTAs) in the halls, stricter staff enforcement of being in class on time, and a block schedule. The result, they said, was there just seemed to be more time to learn, time that was not being chipped away by late arrivals, misbehavior, and frequent class changes. Their buildings were safe, mostly orderly, places where their teachers worked hard to help them succeed.

Students described their schools similarly during the second year of Talent Development's implementation. Teachers continued to find time to offer repeated explanations of assignments and content and to assist students requiring extra help; and the schools overall remained "organized," calm, and orderly. If anything were really different in their comments, it was that they were beginning to lose their amazement about the school environment. Already some students were beginning to switch their feelings of surprise to ones of expectation. "This is how a school is supposed to be," they observed. Thus, students' descriptions of their schools detailed a story of urban education on the ascent.

The changes behind the schools' revivals were the outgrowths of their participation in Talent Development, a program developed by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk at Johns Hopkins University. This comprehensive school reform model – aimed at improving high-poverty high schools that faced serious problems with student attendance, discipline, achievement scores, and dropout rates – encouraged specific changes in school organization and management, curriculum and instruction, and teacher professional development. The cornerstone of the program, the Ninth Grade Success Academy, addressed the catastrophic failure rates that had long characterized Philadelphia's ninth graders in these two high schools and the other 20 comprehensive secondary schools in the District (Furstenberg, Neild, and Weiss, 1998). The Academy promoted high expectations and extensive academic and social support as central vehicles for putting a belief that all students could succeed into action.

This report details students' perspectives on their lives in Talent Development high schools during the second year of the program (at two of the three schools) and has two major sections. The first follows up on the comments that students made during the first year and demonstrates that the schools had managed to retain the constructive features of the schools' environments that students had found so pleasing. The second section details additional aspects of students' experiences that emerged during the continued evolution of Talent Development. Together the two sections describe a most unusual circumstance for these students – a systematic and cumulative improvement in their opportunities to learn.

These findings are based upon interviews with 86 ninth-grade students, equally distributed across three high schools in Philadelphia. In addition to talking with ninth-graders, we checked in with 45 students whom we interviewed as ninth-graders the previous year to see what progress they were making and what their thoughts were about the instructional program. All three high schools served low-income, racial minority neighborhoods with two enrolling almost exclusively African American students (98%) while the third enrolled mostly Hispanic students (77%). The three schools varied in size

from 1600 to 2600 students. Two of the high schools were in the second year of implementing the Talent Development model while the third was in its first year.

Student interviews occurred in the late spring of the school year to ensure students' opinions reflected a whole year's experience. The students were randomly selected to capture a range of performance and attendance in the schools, based on reviews of their first semester report cards. We balanced our sample by gender and made sure we spoke to a few students in each of the homerooms.

No one refused to talk to us; almost all of the students were eager to share their thoughts, and they openly discussed what they liked and did not like about school. Our conversations were open-ended, allowing students to talk about instructional and curricular issues of importance to them, but we made a point to review how well they were doing, what they liked and disliked about their classes and the program (including the block schedule, the separation from the upper grades, specific courses, etc.), thoughts on their teachers, and plans for the future. The conversations typically ranged from 30 to 45 minutes.

Comparisons of Students' Comments About the First and Second Years in Talent Development

In the first year, students – nearly every one of them – said that the general tone of their buildings had changed, either from what they had previously experienced directly or had heard about from other students. Students discussed how they and their peers were fighting less, attending more regularly, and generally getting along with one another better than in the past. This happened, they argued, for a couple of reasons: the ninth graders were physically separated from other students – thereby reducing their chances of being picked on or needing to "show off" for older students – and the buildings had tightened security – including metal detectors, electronically-readable IDs, and more non-teaching assistants (NTAs) in the halls. They said that they just felt "safer" and that the school seemed better "organized."

Inside the classroom, students liked that most of their teachers were going out of their way to help, not giving up on students and always encouraging them to do more, setting clear expectations, and introducing content that they had not had before. These features gave students the feeling that class time was indeed for learning and not misbehavior. As one student pointed out:

> *The educational system also got better. In the past the teachers didn't care 'cause the students didn't care. Students now care more.*

Overall, then, students said that they were now in schools that differed dramatically from what they had expected, from what others had told them would be the case, or from what they had directly witnessed. More specifically, students noted the invaluable and interconnected roles that five aspects of their Talent Development schools played in making learning a less haphazard process than had been the case in the past: teachers' helpfulness, the block schedule, the Freshmen Seminar, a physical separation of grade levels, and second chances.

The issue of help dominated our interviews with the high school students during our first year of this study (Corbett and Wilson, 2001), as it had in our other studies of urban students (see Wilson and Corbett, 2001). Teachers, parents, and siblings alike had alerted them to the probability that there would be no handholding, no arm-around-the-shoulder encouragement, no second chances. "It's all on you," they repeatedly heard. We asked students whether this had proven to be true. Sixty-seven out of 79 ninth-graders from the two schools said, "No."

They claimed that, contrary to the rumors, their high school teachers were just as – if not more than – helpful as the ones they had had in middle school. They said that helpful teachers made sure that everyone understood what was being talked about before moving on to the next topic or assignment; explained content and assignments in a variety of ways; found time to talk with students about their work and in ways that were

most comfortable to the students; tried to establish real relationships with them; were strict, in terms of both making them behave and seeing to it that they completed their work; and, finally, gave them second chances to redo missed or poorly executed work and to retake tests, which meant that teachers wanted them to learn and understand the material foremost.

As to why their teachers seemed so helpful, students continually spoke about their feeling that teachers "took the time to teach." The block schedule contributed to this. Despite the understandable complaints about having to sit for 90 minutes, students were willing to overlook their periodic restlessness and acknowledged that the block was a positive change with respect to learning. In fact, 107 out of 148 students (72 percent) said that they preferred 90-minute classes to shorter ones. Of the 41 who did not prefer the new schedule, six were neutral and not a single student among the 41 argued that they learned better with shorter classes. This did not mean that the vast majority of students thought that all of their classes were perfect. In fact, they understandably – and predictably – were pleased with some teachers more than others. What students were claiming was that they learned more in the block classes than they had with schedules of seven or eight classes.

Students also noted three other aspects of the Success Academy experience that reinforced the idea that school was a place for learning. The first was the common Freshman Seminar course required of all students that was intended to provide them with the skills necessary to cope with high school curricula. The second was the physical separation of the Success Academy program from the rest of the high school. And the third was the notion that "second chances" were essential for students to help them get caught up with their class if they did not perform well during their first year in high school.

Almost three-quarters of the students were favorably disposed to their Freshman Seminar experiences (55 positive, 20 negative) and suggested that the course warranted being a required course for all incoming freshman in the city. Most noteworthy in

students' eyes was how the course provided them with organizational skills that helped them in all their other classes. The content focused not only on providing more order to their cluttered notebooks, but also on devising important strategies for completing their assignments. In other words, they were learning how to learn.

Students at the two schools had different opinions about the value of separating the grades. At one school where many of the ninth grade students had been enrolled for two previous years as part of a combined middle/high school, there was considerably more enthusiasm for the separation. By a two to one margin they lauded the initiative (21 in favor, 11 against). Many of them had been part of a school that was disorderly, graffiti-infested, and litter strewn. They remembered a building where students previously wandered unimpeded throughout the building, taking little pride in the appearance of the impersonal building. They returned to a new school year with partitioned hallways and more controlled access to newly defined houses of the building--several schools within the school, including the Success Academy. It was now much easier to take ownership of their own section of the building, ensuring safety and cleanliness. And, their enthusiasm for the separation derived primarily from the fact that there were fewer disruptions to the academic environment, and students could thus concentrate on their work.

At the other school, students' assessment of being separated from older students was more mixed with just under half in favor (N=14) and just over half (N=16) opposed. At this school a less dramatic change in overall school environment from the previous year contributed to this less positive view. For them, the only real change was that the ninth grade was now on the third floor while the upperclassmen were distributed throughout the lower two floors.

One of the high schools gave ninth graders who failed an "institutional second chance" – the opportunity to re-enroll in the ninth grade with the incentive that if they performed well in the first semester, they could go on to the tenth grade as early as the second semester. We spoke with 18 students who had failed their first year of high

school and then had followed this faster path into the tenth grade. Their motivation to do so stemmed from having a clear idea about what it would take for them to move up without repeating an entire year and from believing that because the school had established the alternative route, then teachers must have had faith in their ability to travel it successfully.

Despite the improvements in the buildings, the objective evidence did not bode well for these Philadelphia high school students. Historically, nearly sixty percent of all Philadelphia ninth graders have failed at least one course. Only three out of every five first-year ninth graders from across the city have met the new requirements for promotion to tenth grade. Despite the harsh numbers concerning academic failure, the students at these two schools remained upbeat and optimistic about their futures. Eighty-five percent of the students who talked about future plans definitely mentioned college being on the horizon. Eight percent were unsure, saying that their grades, family finances, or unclear occupational goals might cause them not to attend. Only seven percent had completely ruled out post-secondary plans. And of all the students we interviewed, only one mentioned that he did not plan to finish high school. Unfortunately, what was missing from these descriptions of their futures were any concrete understandings of what it would take to move students closer to their dreams.

The Second Year: A Similar Story

Because Talent Development concentrated on the pivotal ninth grade year, the reactions of the Success Academy students were central to understanding the effects of the program. It was during this year that so many youth fell off the track leading to high school graduation. The extent to which the schools could engender a degree of persistence in these teenagers would provide a much-needed boost to the number of students who eventually would graduate from these buildings. For that reason, it was important to determine if each successive cohort of ninth graders was sensing benefits from attending Talent Development high schools. Only in this way would it be possible

to assert that the experiences students described were programmatic and systematic in nature.

The following data boost the argument of programmatic and systematic benefits in two ways. One is that the current year students at two of the schools echoed those of their predecessors and the second is that students from a third school, in its first year of Talent Development, joined the chorus of praise for the more productive learning environment they were encountering. Their combined responses are detailed below.

In total, we interviewed eighty-six ninth-grade students from the three schools in the late spring of 2001. They were nearly unanimous in their belief that they were getting solid preparation for the remainder of their high school careers and beyond. They found their teachers to be as helpful, if not more so, than the ones they had in middle school – much to their amazement given the stories they had heard about "sinking or swimming" at the high school level. They also identified core elements of the Talent Development model as making significant contributions to their positive reactions, particularly the four-block schedule, the physical separation of the ninth grade from the other grades, and the freshman seminar.

The Block Schedule. As had their counterparts in the ninth grade last year, a majority of the students responded favorably to having only four classes a day, with two-thirds saying they preferred this arrangement. There were several reasons for this preference. Fewer classes, some students claimed, allowed them to focus better, with fewer subjects to keep track of and more time to spend on the ones they had. For example:

> *I like four best 'cause I can concentrate. With seven classes you have different things to think about. I be unorganized. Four classes help me be organized.*

> *Four is best because there is not so much to worry about. You have four assignments, four classes to keep your grades up in.*

I like four so I can concentrate on the class better. (I can concentrate better) if I have a whole lot more time to think.

Students also liked not having to race through assignments, which was an ever-present necessity with shorter periods. As a student explained:

You get more time to do work and think about what you're doing. You don't have to rush.

But, mostly, students argued that they actually learned more in the 90-minute classes. It was a rather obvious equation in their minds. If you spend more time on a subject, you learn more about the subject each day.

Most notably, students described daily routines in their classes that offered them plenty of opportunities to receive assistance from the teacher. The ninety-minute time period meant that teachers could devote more time to explaining assignments, allowing students to ask questions, and visiting students either in their work groups or individually to clarify confusing concepts and content. Students said that this situation resulted in their completing their work in a more timely way than when they had seven or eight classes in a day and interrupted the frustrating cycle of having the teacher introduce new material while they were still finishing up assignments from prior lessons.

I learn better with four. You can do some of the work you're supposed to do at home in class.

While teachers may have preferred that students take work with them at the end of the day to maintain homework habits, students felt that being able to do the assignments at school gave them access to immediate assistance.

Even students who indicated that they would rather have seven or eight classes a day acknowledged that they learned more about a particular subject with the block schedule. Their dissatisfaction with longer classes most often stemmed from the fact that they were – simply – longer. Students who grasped material readily and did their work quickly found themselves with more time on their hands than they wanted. Thus, it was the "A" and "B" students who tended to become impatient with the block. Their dislike of "doing nothing," however, actually reflected a common theme from all of the students, which was that they liked teachers who taught and had activities for the entire period (with occasional breaks) better than ones that gave students a lot of free time (either intentionally or as a byproduct of having to devote considerable time to discipline).

Nevertheless, it was clear that teachers had more time to help students and the consequence of this was that the students' high school experiences belied their expectations that they would be "on their own" to learn. They generated a considerable list of descriptions of teacher assistance. For example, students noted that their teachers "will sit down and teach you if you don't understand," "they be tutoring us after school," "are always asking if I need help," "help me any time I want it," "make sure we know how to do the work," and "take the time to explain until we understand," which closely paralleled what previous Success Academy students had said. As one student put it, teachers who helped taught the "right way."

> *He teaches the right way: everyone learns and has fun. [Queried further on what "the right way" meant] He makes sure everyone has a turn to say what they know and when someone doesn't understand, he helps them out. He does everything just right for everyone in the class. He treats everyone equally. No one feels left out. Everyone respects him.*

Importantly, 69 of 81 (every student did not answer every question during the interviews and, thus, the number of responses for each issue discussed varies) ninth graders said that their Success Academy teachers were as helpful if not more helpful than were their middle school teachers. They added that this meant, therefore, that they had teachers

who "care about us" and "want us to learn." Thus, the student-teacher relationships tremendously benefited from the extended class periods.

Students indicated that some teachers were more helpful than others. All of them could point to at least one teacher in their schedule who diligently attended to individual and group difficulties in understanding an assignment or particular content. Most talked about several who did so. Students also said that help was not uniformly available. Their responses indicated that help was more consistently found from classroom to classroom than in the previous year but the lack of it in any class was still a worrisome issue to students. Students claimed that unhelpful teachers reacted to most questions as if they were the products of inattention rather than confusion; and students admitted that the teachers' suppositions were often correct. Nevertheless, they argued, teenagers would be teenagers and teachers should teach them regardless.

We drew our sample of ninth graders to include those who were doing both well and poorly and who attended frequently and less frequently. Whether the resulting collection of students was representative of the ninth graders overall was an unanswered question. Still, among those we interviewed, 35 of the 86 said that they were failing a course, even amidst the helpful atmosphere in their classrooms. In each building, several students laid the blame for this at the feet of a "sink or swim" teacher; however, most shouldered the responsibility themselves, saying that they were not paying attention in a certain class or were absent from that class more than others (typically first period) or they had been absent from school often and had not been able to catch up as well in a certain class (typically math). While this 40 percent statistic was a third less than the rate for the comprehensive high schools overall (as mentioned above, almost 60 percent of ninth graders historically failed at least one class in these schools), it underscored the challenging environment in which the schools operated, and students were very clear that less help would have made things dramatically worse.

Separation. Also different from what students expected to find in high school was their physical separation from the rest of the school. The Success Academies were

located in contained areas in the building, and the students rarely mixed with older students. Not surprisingly, this caused a number of them to complain that ninth grade was "just like middle school." Nevertheless, two-thirds of them thought that keeping their distance was a good idea. It was "more comfortable," as several of them stated.

Few of them were worried about their own safety in terms of older students picking on or hassling them. Rather, the ninth graders tended to think that their older friends would entice them to misbehave and that they would be unable to resist joining in the fun and/or wanting to save face. One student explained:

> *Personally, me, I know a lot of older kids. I'd get mixed up with them and not do my work. We can stay on track better this way. I got to stay focused. I try hard to stay focused.*

There was also the potential for older friends to be drawn into a conflict between ninth graders if the upperclassmen were in the vicinity.

> *Separation is a good idea. If ninth graders get in a fight, their big cousin would be right there.*

Thus, despite the feeling that the Success Academy did not "feel" like high school, students appreciated the potential problems that distance muted.

The proximity of their classes also meant that they spent less time in transit. Often, students only had to travel several doors to reach the next class. With the additional NTAs being present and teachers watching closely from their doorways, period changes went relatively smoothly. All of these features combined to cause students to observe that their respective schools were "organized" and that, for the most part, students tended to be "under control."

Of course, students said that they were more under control for some teachers than others – a fact that separation from other grade levels did not change. To be sure, they did not describe classroom situations where students ran rampant, but they did depict classes in which teachers spent a good portion of the time getting students quiet, trying to prevent students from distracting one another, or overtly disrespecting the teacher. Typically such teachers were labeled as "weak" or "too nice." The best teachers, students said over and over, were those who were strict in a fair way and, thus, actually devoted most of class time to instruction. Separating the grades, therefore, contributed to a general atmosphere of order and calm but did not necessarily resolve classroom management issues.

Freshman Seminar. To help students make the transition from middle to high school work habits, Talent Development instituted a required ninth grade course called the Freshman Seminar. The class covered a range of topics, from career alternatives to note taking. Each topic addressed some skill that the staff deemed important for students to develop that may have fallen outside the direct focus of particular subject areas.

Three-fourths of the students indicated that the class acclimatized them to high school and informed them about what life in high school and beyond would be like. For some, the class got them thinking about possible careers; others felt that they developed study skills and work habits, especially note-taking, that would be needed in the coming years; and still others enjoyed the opportunity to have whole class discussions, which gave them confidence to speak out in class – on school-related matters.

Because social studies teachers typically taught the seminar, some students confused their reactions to the seminar with their opinions of history class. Nevertheless, in this second year of implementation, students indicated that teachers' approaches to the seminar were more consistent from one classroom to the next than had been the case in the first year, a development that will be discussed further in the section on the evolution of Talent Development in the second year.

A Schoolwide Effect

In the first year, the changes in two of the schools were most noticeable to the tenth graders because they had directly seen the dramatic shift. They were not observers from afar. The block schedule and closer scrutiny extended beyond the Success Academy into their world as well. Thus, the sense that teachers were being more helpful and that both classrooms and the school as a whole were more organized was as real to them as it was to the ninth graders.

We kept in touch with the ninth graders from the first year to see what their thoughts would be about tenth grade and whether they still found the staff to be focused on their success. All but a handful agreed that their teachers were, in fact, as helpful as they had been in the Success Academy, that they preferred the block schedule (partially because it provided time for such help), and that the general atmosphere among students was one of order and calm. They claimed, again all but a few, that the Success Academy had prepared them for tenth grade work, and they remained decidedly upbeat about their futures, both the prospects for graduation and occupations. Thus, it seemed that the changes associated with creating the Success Academy had continued to influence student life throughout the buildings.

The Second Year: The Evolution of the Talent Development Program

As noted in the previous section, it was almost as though we were listening to a broken record when comparing assessments of last year's ninth graders regarding the Success Academy with ninth graders in the same schools the previous year. For the schools to replicate the initial gains was impressive in light of the instability of leadership and tenuous political future of the district.

But a simple reiteration of sustaining initial support shortchanges the tone of students' comments. What we also heard was a maturing of the program that went beyond maintenance. More specifically, in this next section we document how students

were able to articulate the value that teams added to their experience over and above constructive classroom instruction; describe in detail how their experiences in the Freshman Seminar were systematically moving closer to the developer's intended design; characterize their classroom work as challenging to them; and offer deeper insights into their views that they were getting a quality education.

The Value of a Team Approach

Talent Development was predicated on research that the first year of high school was particularly challenging for students. Students often never fully engaged themselves with either academics or the social side of being a student. So, an important objective of the Success Academy experience was to break down the anonymity of the big high school by establishing small teams of four core subject teachers (math, science, English, and social studies) who had responsibility for the same group of 150 to 200 students. This team approach tackled student disengagement by:

- Working together to personalize and individualize the learning environment for each student,
- Building a strong climate of caring and support for students and staff,
- Sharing information and resources and providing each other with collegial support,
- Coordinating instruction and curriculum across subjects,
- Providing students with a constructive and united front on discipline and attendance, and
- Promoting students' social attachment to school by providing them with a team identity and a group of adults who are looking out for them and to whom they can turn for guidance (Morrison & Letgers, 1998).

There were outward signs in the buildings that the teams were, in fact, meaningful organizational units. For example, dotting bulletin boards were posters promoting future team field trips, lists of honor roll students or students of the month, charts of team

attendance with goals and rewards for best performance noted, and motivational displays portraying the importance and value of academic effort.

Students' comments suggested that the teams were developing important characteristics in daily school life. The most striking observations students made were between the school where Talent Development was in its first year of implementation as compared to the two more mature schools. In the former school, all but a couple of the interviewees said they did not know why the school had teams or what value they added to students' high school experiences. Many of the students acknowledged that some special activities were planned just for their team (e.g. field trips), but they were equivocal about the value of such efforts. Half of them said they were "fun," while the other half claimed they were " childish" or "better suited for elementary kids."

Interestingly one of the few positive student comments came from one who hoped her high school team would soon resemble the one she had been part of in middle school, a school that was already part of the Talent Development middle school initiative.

> *Our team in middle school had more activities and we did more hands-on things. For example, my team theme was entrepreneurship. At Christmastime we created a school mall. Students had money and we could buy and sell things. We had to learn how to budget our money. We also had a contest to see who could sell the most. Also, one Friday a month we had a special project day. My team made a map of the neighborhood. We made it into a Power-point presentation. We even had to present it to an outside person [other than a teacher].*

The two schools with more history in implementing the Success Academy had students who were more favorably disposed to the idea of teams, perhaps a developmental phenomenon reflecting the likelihood that the more senior schools had already worked through more pressing start-up issues. Thus, it should probably be expected to hear that teams were taking on more distinctive characteristics in the second year. Over two-thirds of the interviewees in the two veteran sites said that they were.

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Students highlighted one of two themes in their comments: (1) the team as a motivational tool, and (2) the team as a provider of extra-classroom learning experiences. Motivation was the most prominent characteristic students attributed to their being part of a team. The smaller teams helped connect students to school via activities and gave them tangible reasons for attending.

S: We have bake sales, candy days, and trips. We get rewards for being good.
I: Are these assemblies and awards a good idea?
S: Yeah, if I make the honor roll, I need to be rewarded to keep me working hard.

S: For me it's good to be on Team A. We go on trips; we sell candy every Friday to raise money for trips. We also have honor roll awards.
I: Is that a good idea?
S: Yeah, it encourages us to do good, to come every day.

The teams also offered diverse learning experiences that might not have been as systematically available if students had had to rely on individual teachers to provide them.

S: We get to go on trips and have assemblies where we get awards and watch performances.
I: Is that helpful to you?
S: Yes! That is how you get to know people and see how they act. I've learned that you don't want to be friends with the wrong crowd.

You get to learn different stuff when we do team activities. And team members are also willing to help you learn.

And, finally, a student who reported failing the majority of her classes in middle school, had turned herself around through the attention she had received from her team. Most

significantly, the student had four adults who knew her well. She agreed wholeheartedly with the message her teachers were espousing about the value of teams.

I: Do you like being on a team?

S: Yeah! They [teachers] say that if we wasn't on teams, we would drop out.

The one-third of the students who did not react positively to the team structure was neutral about their value, offering a typical response that "it doesn't matter one way or the other to me" or that "I don't really know why we have them." For whatever reason --and patterns in their responses were varied-- they had not yet developed an affiliation with their particular team.

The Value and Content of the Freshman Seminar

Talent Development program developersargued that one of the ways to make the transition between middle and high school more constructive was for students to learn how to be learners. That is, they needed to be able to keep themselves and their work organized, be strategic about studying for classes, and make the connections between what they were doing in their academic subjects to their future plans and dreams. To aid in these tasks, the Talent Development program included the Freshman Seminar as a required course during the first semester. Its goals were for students to:

- Know about credits, high school graduation requirements, and the courses they need to take to enter a two-year or four-year college or university.
- Learn the study skills they will need to succeed academically in high school and beyond.
- Develop the social skills they will need to be effective learners in school and other arenas.
- Learn important life skills such as goal setting, decision-making, and effective communication and apply these to the challenges and responsibilities of early adulthood.

- Develop a strong awareness of college and postsecondary options and an understanding of the steps they need to prepare for and finance their education beyond high school.
- Explore career interests and learn about educational requirements and job-seeking processes for different jobs in preferred career clusters. (Morrison & Legters, 1998)

Ninth graders during the second year of implementation were positively disposed to having such a class, as was noted earlier. Students were quick to point out that the course was worthwhile for any student entering high school to take:

> *It teaches you more about your future life. It's as important as math or science. It just teaches you basic stuff you need to know.*

> *It's all stuff about our own futures. That's why kids at other schools do bad – they don't learn stuff about their futures.*

But the second-year students' comments differed from those in the first year, especially in the consistency of students' descriptions about the content of the classes. In the first year the majority of students talked about two cornerstones of the Freshman Seminar content: study skills and career choices. With respect to the former, many students offered a variety of specific skills they were learning like note-taking, graphic organizers, writing tips, test-taking techniques, and mind maps. With careers, students talked about learning how to fill out job applications, being prepared for job interviews, writing effective resumés, and knowing educational requirements and advancement opportunities associated with certain vocations.

But scattered throughout all these remarks during the first year was a noticeable inconsistency. Some students could not really recall what they did in the class or they described Freshman Seminar activities that were extensions of their social studies classes (the social studies teachers often taught the courses).

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Both the degree of students' uncertainty about what they studied and the frequency of references to subject area content spilling over into the Freshman Seminar almost disappeared during this second year. Furthermore, students recollected a consistent range of topics covered during the second year. For example, instead of just saying they learned study skills or career skills, they were more likely to interject that that they did both. In one of the schools a third topic was also added to the list – college. Students reported doing research on colleges and learning, for example, what the costs were, the fit between their interests and the majors offered on those campuses, and what the requirements were for entry. Their descriptions suggested that the "enacted" curriculum of the Freshman Seminar was more closely approximating the "expected" curriculum, as outlined by the developers of the course.

The Work as Challenging

Students appreciated the extra supports that were in place to help them become successful in high school. It was undeniable, at least from the students' perspective, that they needed those supports. In other words, they were necessary for future success. Still, for Philadelphia students to make headway compared to more advantaged suburban students (advantaged both in terms of resources and curricular opportunities), the work on which the urban students were receiving help had to be rigorous. Thus, as part of the interviews, we asked students to share their thoughts about whether they were being challenged in school.

Obviously, the students we talked to did not have the reference of a suburban high school experience from which to make comparisons. But they could and did talk about how their high school classrooms were different or similar to those they had just left in middle school. The vast majority of students who discussed this topic in the interviews said that the work they encountered in their Success Academy classes was more challenging than what they confronted in middle school (42 of 57 students). The other

students, with two exceptions, argued that the work was no different from that which they had done in middle school.

> *Middle school was easy. Here it's hard. It's hard, but I get it because the teachers explain it.*

The comment of this student may have gotten to the core of why students saw their work as being more challenging. With the block schedule and the added security, teachers were able to spend more time actually instructing students. Thus, their students said that their coursework was challenging because they were actually in a position to learn.

For students, "challenging" had a couple of meanings. One was that the material was "different" from what they had learned in prior years. This was important to them because they often complained of classes where teachers in one year went over the same ground as their teachers the previous year. To them, such repetition represented a lack of progress and disinterest on the school's part in moving them forward. Even if, from an adult perspective, such "reteaching" was necessary, to the students the situation indicated that they were not "learning" high school work.

> *I am learning new stuff – stuff I haven't done before.*

> *I am learning stuff I didn't know. Sometimes I might not get it, but the teacher breaks it down into a simpler form, you know, explains it with easier language.*

> *I am learning different things – it's not all the same old things.*

Another meaning of "challenging" was that they simply had "more" work to do.

High school is way more challenging than middle school. We do lots of projects, we have tests every other day, there is twice as much work, and teachers just work us hard.

S: The work is different in high school.
I: How is it different?
S: It's the teachers – they just give us more work.

We do more and harder problems in high school.

But few identified their assignments as "too hard" for them to do, a testimony possibly to the amount of help they felt they were receiving.

Our teachers give us harder work. And I like that 'cause you learn more with harder work. And they explain it better, so I understand it.

Academic Satisfaction

Overall, students – again without the benefit of comparison – were emphatically satisfied with the quality of education they were getting in the Success Academy. Four indicators from our conversations with these Success Academy students reinforced that assessment. First, students said they thought they were getting a good education. Second, they reported feeling confident that they were on track for graduation. Third, there was rarely anything students offered as suggestions for changes in their program. And, finally, they reported satisfaction and understanding about their academy choice for their 10th grade placement.

It is difficult to make too much of students' assessments about the quality of their education when they do not have much of a reference. But the consistency with which we heard a positive response and the commonality of explanation for why they thought they were getting a good education were both notable. Almost eighty percent of the

Success Academy students voiced a positive opinion about the quality of their education. The remaining students were split equally between a neutral stance and a negative one.

When pushed for an explanation about why they were getting a good education, almost three-quarters of them mentioned the quality of their teachers – a topic about which their years in school had given them considerable opportunity for comparison.

My teachers are staying on top of me and making sure I'm doing what I need to get out of here.

My teachers make sure that we work hard. They get together and talk about us.

Despite stricter promotion standards, it looked like more than 80 percent of the interviewed students were to be promoted. Whatever the eventual statistic turned out to be, the students' voices contained a prideful and upbeat tone about their prospects for graduation. Even those who had struggled earlier in the year or in middle school remained resolute that they could turn things around.

I am doing much better than middle school [she failed many of her classes]. I am really motivated to graduate.

I: Why did you fail a couple of classes first semester?
S: I just got lazy.
I: Can you turn things around?
S: Yes! I am studying more, doing my homework and my class work. I pay more attention and talk less in class.

When I first started [he failed several classes the first semester], I slept through class, left school early, didn't do my work, played around, and came to class late. But I started thinking about it and my teachers kept telling me if I don't do better I

will be in ninth grade the rest of my life. I didn't want to do that! So, I just started working harder.

In our interviews, we asked students to make suggestions for how they would improve their high schools. Surprisingly, only about one third of them offered any advice on specific changes. Most of them dismissed our query about whether there were any changes they would like to see with: "not really," "nope, can't think of anything," "no, I like it the way it is," or "I like everything about the school." When they did recommend improvements, more often than not the students reflected on a particular teacher who was not helpful enough: "My teacher needs to pay more attention to our work" or "They need to hire teachers who will do the job."

Finally, students voiced their satisfaction with placement in their tenth grade academies (formerly, small learning community). While we do not have comparable data for ninth graders in other schools (who typically are assigned to academies at the end of their middle school careers), we do have the responses of eighth graders in feeder schools to the two veteran high schools prior to the buildings' becoming part of Talent Development. These students had little or no knowledge of the process by which they had been assigned to a high school academy or what they might experience once in that academy. As part of the Success Academy experience, students were supposed to be exposed to more vocational awareness (through the Freshman Seminar) and become familiar with their next year's academy choices. All but a handful of the students we interviewed said they were happy with their academy choices. Those that were not said they had no one to blame but themselves, usually citing their poor grades as an explanation for why they were assigned their second or third choice rather than their top choice. Two of the more common explanations that students offered for their choices reflected a more deliberate consideration than we heard in the past. The first was the influence of classroom teachers:

I chose Motivation because my math teacher told me to take it if I want to become a lawyer.

My Freshman Seminar teacher took us around and showed us the academies. He helped me pick the Electrical academy.

The other explanation had to do with how students could articulate a connection between a possible future career choice and their assignment to an academy.

I picked Cosmetology because I want to own my own beauty shop and it will teach me want I need to know.

I watched a skit the Law students did. I saw how it could help me to become a cop – how to get respect from others.

Thus, students appeared to be satisfied customers with their schools. Underlying their comments, however, was an unavoidable element of trust; trust in the adults who taught them. Students essentially were saying that what they were being taught and asked to do were the skills and actions that were necessary for graduation. In other words, there was some circular reasoning going on: the content and instruction in their high schools was good because they were offered; if they were not what student needed to know and be able to do, then teachers would not have asked them to do it. Students, as a result of this reasoning, were placing considerable responsibility on educators to make sure that they were not just settling for conformity to mundane activities but rather were truly giving students the kind of education they needed to be successful later on in school and in life.

One final comment on students' assessments of their schools is worth making. A subtly changing indicator of Talent Development's influence was that fewer students said that they had found their respective schools to be different from what they had been told they would be like. This is important because previous students reported that they were pleasantly surprised that their high schools were not the rowdy, impersonal, and disruptive places their reputations suggested they would be. More students in this year's

cohort, however, were beginning to say that they had heard that their high-schools-to-be were good schools and that they concurred that, in fact, "This is a good school."

The Challenge Ahead: Maintaining Reform in an Unstable System

The organizational ability to consolidate successes into a foundation for further progress has not been a hallmark of urban high schools in general and the Philadelphia Schools in particular. Indeed, the current crisis about funding and managing the city's local schools represents only one of the numerous events that periodically interfere with the schools' operations. Thus, one of the more remarkable aspects of the students' accounts from the second year was that so much of what had been accomplished in the first year remained intact. Talent Development had proven itself to be more than a one-time experiment that fell into disarray in the face of subsequent pressures.

The above comments underline the value of continuity in reform. For the students we interviewed, school and classroom life had become predictable. Lessons started on time, and there was time to complete them during the class period. Stragglers to rooms were few, and those who struggled in class knew that help was likely to be immediately available. The hallways were safe, students were calm, and staff members were visibly present throughout class changes.

Moreover, the program showed signs of maturation. For example, students began to see that their teams represented meaningful divisions of their grade levels and not just organizational conveniences. The teams motivated and educated students over and above what individual teachers alone could do. Maturation also meant that students' descriptions of course content and activities in the freshman seminar showed more similarities from one class to another – indicative of the probability that the "enacted" curriculum was beginning to match the "written" curriculum. Students also increasingly encountered challenging work and were satisfied that their academic preparation well-prepared them for graduation and beyond.

Looking ahead, the schools--and those who assist and support the schools' efforts --obviously must maintain the gains they have achieved. It is beyond the purview of this report to talk about "objective" gains; instead the gains we speak of are those of perception and particularly students' perceptions that they are now attending "good" schools. Compared to more wealthy schools, this sense of quality may not be warranted; but compared to what students had seen and heard about in their communities previously, it was undoubtedly the case that their schools were better.

The schools, of course, need to be able to show that "objective" gains (especially test scores) reflect the perceived ones. Students' comments point the way to two additional avenues for improvement: increase the prospects for extra help being systemic, and take advantage of orderly buildings and classrooms to incorporate effective instruction. Talent Development is already pursuing both of these through formal assistance and professional development endeavors. What students would add is that these efforts have to ensure greater consistency in help and effective instruction from classroom to classroom.

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